

January 30, 2024 – Fryeburg Use of Deadly Force Incident

As required by 5 M.R.S. § 200-K, the Maine Deadly Force Review Panel submits the following report of the use of deadly force incident in Fryeburg on January 30, 2024, involving Officer Michael St. Laurent of the Fryeburg Police Department, which resulted in the death of Kenneth W. Ellis, age 52. By statute, after the release of the report of the Attorney General, the Panel shall examine deaths or serious injuries resulting from the use of deadly force by a law enforcement officer. The purpose of the examination is to find independently whether there was compliance with accepted and best practices under the circumstances or whether the practices require adjustment or improvement. The Panel may recommend methods for improving standards, including changes to statutes, rules, training, and policies and procedures, designed to ensure best practices that promote increased public and officer safety. It should be noted that the Panel’s “Observations” are case-specific bullet points that have been pulled directly from the incident case file and are primarily intended to highlight key pieces of information. The Panel’s “Recommendations” should be viewed as potential system-level issues to consider during future critical incidents. The Panel is not charged with undertaking a *de novo* review of the Attorney General’s determination regarding the legality of the use of deadly force by law enforcement; discussions and recommendations of the Panel are independent of the Attorney General.

Synopsis

During the early evening of January 30, 2024, a police officer in Conway, New Hampshire, was notified about a pickup truck with Massachusetts plates driving erratically. Shortly after, the officer saw the vehicle in a convenience store parking lot and observed a man nearby enter the truck and drive away. The driver ignored the officer's signals to stop. The officer briefly pursued the vehicle but ended the pursuit in accordance with departmental policy. Alerted that the vehicle was heading toward Fryeburg, Maine, Officer Michael St. Laurent of the Fryeburg Police Department and an Oxford County Sheriff’s deputy positioned themselves about half a mile from the state line in separate cruisers. Officer St. Laurent first stopped a vehicle of a similar description. While completing that stop, the deputy informed him he had spotted what was likely the fleeing vehicle from Conway, which was being driven recklessly. Officer St. Laurent then saw the vehicle speeding through an intersection and activated his emergency lights and siren. The vehicle weaved in and out of the opposing lane and sped through town at 90–100 miles per hour. It hit two cars turning into a parking lot and rear-ended a third, causing it to spin and flip over. The suspect vehicle then crashed into a snowbank. Officer St. Laurent exited his cruiser and ordered the driver, later identified as Kenneth Ellis, to show his hands. The driver ignored the commands, got out, and charged at Officer St. Laurent with a knife. The officer backed up while telling Mr. Ellis to drop the knife. When Mr. Ellis kept advancing and was within about ten feet, Officer St. Laurent shot him. Mr. Ellis died at the scene, holding the knife in his hand.

Information the Panel Reviewed

Before its meeting, the Panel members received the investigative material compiled by the Attorney General. The material consisted of all the original investigative data, including interview recordings, reports, forensic reports, photographs, emergency communications, and other relevant

materials. The Panel also reviewed the Attorney General's September 26, 2024, report and the internal investigation report of the Fryeburg Police Department, dated December 19, 2024.

Panel Discussion

On November 25, 2025, the Panel convened via Zoom to review the referenced incident. Several issues were discussed, including the suspect's significant criminal and mental health history, the equipment failures involving the cruiser video/audio and body cam, the failure to timely retrieve information that the body cam did likely capture, the emotional impact on the involved officer, the failure of the IRT report to include the Oxford County Sheriff's Department, and the marked consistency of the multiple witness interviews.

Observations

1. The suspect has an extensive criminal history in Massachusetts and Florida. He had just been released from the Barnstable County Jail on January 29, 2024, for an assault charge reportedly involving a knife.
2. According to family members, the suspect had a long history of mental health and substance abuse issues. He reportedly had been in and out of a psychiatric hospital for bipolar disorder/anxiety and had been a heroin addict for 35 years, for which he received methadone treatment. He also reportedly had an inoperable brain tumor monitored by a neurologist.
3. The post-mortem toxicology report was positive for fentanyl and methadone.
4. There was no video of the deadly force encounter. When Officer St. Laurent turned off his siren, the cruiser video shut off. It was later determined that the equipment installer had set it up so that the recording would stop when the siren was deactivated rather than when the emergency lights were deactivated. Similarly, the officer's body-worn camera did not record the incident. It was later learned from the equipment manufacturer that the body-worn camera has a retrieval component that captures video footage when the camera is not manually activated, but in this instance, the retrieval process was not initiated in a timely manner, resulting in any relevant footage being overwritten.
5. The IRT report was well done, but lacked any apparent involvement of the Oxford County Sheriff's Department.
6. Multiple people witnessed the incident, all of whom were interviewed with the help of the State Police Major Crimes Unit. Their accounts of the incident were notably consistent.

Recommendations

1. The Panel has stressed the importance of cruiser video and body-worn camera equipment. The Panel recommends that each law enforcement agency designate an officer to serve as a liaison

with the equipment vendor/installer to ensure that operational details are firmly established and, in turn, shared with the agency's other members.

2. As noted in prior reports, the Panel recommends that all law enforcement agencies involved in a deadly force incident jointly perform the required internal review.

Factual Summary

On January 30, 2024, at approximately 5:20 pm, a motorist informed Sgt. Jonathan Hill of the Conway, New Hampshire, Police Department of a vehicle operating erratically on Route 16/Main Street in Conway. The motorist provided a detailed description of the vehicle: a black single-cab Ford F-150 pickup truck with a Massachusetts license plate and a striped, multicolored towel hanging in the passenger-side window, as if the window were missing. Sgt. Hill started looking for the vehicle and spotted what he believed to be it parked at the convenience store's fuel pumps, with its engine running. Sgt. Hill confirmed it was the same vehicle described by the motorist. The vehicle was unoccupied, but a man was standing nearby, smoking a cigarette. The man started walking toward the vehicle, at which point Sgt. Hill exited his cruiser. When the man opened the driver's side door, Sgt. Hill called out loudly, indicating that he wanted to speak with him. The man seemed to ignore the officer purposely and continued entering the vehicle, prompting Sgt. Hill to yell again for him to stop. The man ignored Sgt. Hill, and it was clear he intended to flee. Sgt. Hill returned to his cruiser as the man drove off. Sgt. Hill activated his cruiser's emergency flashing lights as he exited the parking lot and entered the roadway to initiate a traffic stop. The vehicle failed to stop and began weaving through traffic. The traffic volume at the nearby lighted intersections was moderate to heavy, and Sgt. Hill decided it was safer to continue pursuing the vehicle through the village with his emergency lights on to warn the public. He also thought that, since the driver's image had been captured on video at the convenience store and the license plate was known and matched the vehicle, a continued pursuit might not be necessary, as the driver could likely be identified and charged later. Sgt. Hill told dispatch he would pursue only long enough to get the vehicle through the traffic congestion and then terminate the chase. He was concerned that the driver's willingness to flee through heavy traffic indicated that the pursuit's speed would increase significantly once open roadway was reached. The vehicle continued through two traffic-light intersections and, shortly afterward, Sgt. Hill deactivated his emergency lights and notified dispatch that he was following at a distance. His goal was to keep the vehicle in sight long enough to determine its direction at the major intersections. During this time, the vehicle passed more than one vehicle and traveled on the wrong side of the road as it crested a hill. When Sgt. Hill reached the top, he saw that the vehicle was traveling at a high speed. The vehicle continued past another office toward Maine and was no longer visible to the Conway officers. Sgt. Hill relayed the vehicle information to Fryeburg-area law enforcement on the Oxford County (Maine) Regional Communications radio frequency.

During the pursuit in Conway, Officer Michael St. Laurent of the Fryeburg (Maine) Police Department and Oxford County Sheriff's Deputy Justin Groetzinger were parked in separate cruisers at the Fryeburg Fire Department. Officer St. Laurent was listening to radio traffic from the Conway Police Department. He heard that the Conway Police had received a complaint of a

black Ford F-150 pickup truck with Massachusetts plates operating erratically. He also heard that when officers tried to stop the vehicle, it fled, prompting Conway Police officers to begin pursuing the truck. Officer St. Laurent informed Deputy Groetzinger of the radio traffic and suggested they go to the State of Maine visitor information building, about half a mile from the state border, in case they needed to assist the Conway officers. Officer St. Laurent and Deputy Groetzinger parked at the entrance to the visitor information building. Officer St. Laurent prepared a spike mat in his patrol vehicle and placed it in the back seat in case he needed it.

Officer St. Laurent then heard on the police radio that the Conway officers had lost sight of the pickup truck and had ended their pursuit. Shortly thereafter, Deputy Groetzinger saw a black F-150 pickup truck on Route 302 passing their location and informed Officer St. Laurent. The pickup was in a line of vehicles heading toward in-town Fryeburg and appeared to be operating normally. Officer St. Laurent decided to stop the truck to identify the operator so he could relay that information to the Conway officers. He stopped the pickup in a commercial parking lot. As the truck entered the parking lot, Officer St. Laurent observed that it had a New Hampshire license plate, indicating it was not the correct vehicle. Officer St. Laurent saw blue lights in the distance as Deputy Groetzinger radioed him that the suspect vehicle was coming his way. A black F-150 pickup truck then drove by him, heading towards in-town Fryeburg at a very high rate of speed, which he estimated to be 100 mph. As the pickup truck approached, Officer St. Laurent saw that the operator was driving in the oncoming lane, passing a line of cars. As the pickup truck passed by Officer St. Laurent, the operator began pulling back into the correct lane of travel. While doing so, he nearly struck the vehicle he was attempting to overtake. Officer St. Laurent activated his emergency lights and siren and followed the pickup truck. He observed that the pickup was again traveling in the opposite lane at high speed through a curve and up an incline, thereby limiting visibility of oncoming traffic. As Officer St. Laurent reached the top of the incline, he saw that the pickup had moved back into its proper lane after nearly colliding head-on with a vehicle coming from the opposite direction. He kept his eyes on the pickup, estimating it had about a ten-second lead, but he wasn't gaining any ground. Meanwhile, the Oxford County Regional Communications Center was receiving 911 calls from motorists reporting that a speeding truck was forcing them off the road.

Officer St. Laurent was about to inform Dispatch of his intention to discontinue following the pickup truck because of heavy traffic when he saw the pickup truck collide with a vehicle turning into a parking lot. The pickup truck continued past the crash site and hit two more vehicles — one turning into the same parking lot and another one ahead of the fleeing truck, which was rear-ended, causing it to spin and roll over. The driver of the suspect vehicle finally stopped in front of a bank, partly on the sidewalk and partly in the breakdown lane. Officer St. Laurent tried to stop his patrol vehicle, but experienced “brake fade” and ended up stopping closer to the pickup than he had planned. (“Brake fade” is a temporary and sudden reduction of braking power caused by excessive heat from repeated braking under high loads or at high speeds.) The front passenger side of his patrol vehicle was slightly behind the driver's side door of the pickup truck.

Officer St. Laurent exited the patrol vehicle with his firearm drawn and the flashlight attached to his weapon turned on. He could see the male operator, later identified as Kenneth Ellis, sitting in the driver's seat of the pickup truck. Officer St. Laurent began issuing commands to Mr. Ellis to show his hands and exit the vehicle. Officer St. Laurent repeatedly commanded Mr. Ellis to show his hands and exit the vehicle. He then observed Mr. Ellis turn on the interior dome light and saw

him “digging” in the center console or the passenger side front seat area. Officer St. Laurent was standing behind the engine block of his cruiser. When he saw Mr. Ellis reaching around the center console or the passenger-side area of his pickup truck, he began to back up alongside the driver’s side of his cruiser because he was unsure whether Mr. Ellis was attempting to retrieve a weapon. When Officer St. Laurent got to the driver’s side rear view mirror of his cruiser, Mr. Ellis flung open his door quickly and aggressively exited the pickup truck. Mr. Ellis began walking around the front of Officer St. Laurent’s cruiser towards Officer St. Laurent, and Officer St. Laurent began back-peddling alongside the cruiser. As Mr. Ellis turned the corner by the driver’s side front bumper of the cruiser, he estimated that Mr. Ellis was about 12 feet away from him. Mr. Ellis kept walking toward Officer St. Laurent and stared at him. As Mr. Ellis came around the corner of the cruiser near the driver’s side front bumper, Officer St. Laurent saw that he had a knife in his hand. He described the knife as a fixed blade with a silver blade about five to six inches long. Mr. Ellis kept approaching as Officer St. Laurent backed up and gave commands. Mr. Ellis was walking faster than Officer St. Laurent could backpedal. Mr. Ellis was gesturing with his hands, moving them up and away from his sides. Officer St. Laurent saw Mr. Ellis’s mouth moving and knew he was yelling, but he didn’t discern what he was saying. Mr. Ellis continued to close the distance, and when he was less than ten feet away, Officer St. Laurent shot Mr. Ellis, who immediately fell to the ground on his back with the knife still clenched in his hand. Mr. Ellis died at the scene.

Panel Members

Fernand LaRochelle, Chair

Stephen Burlock, Esq., Assistant District Attorney (Retired), Vice Chair/Secretary

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Note: The individuals serving on the Panel are appointed to apply their professional expertise to discussions of these complex cases. Therefore, members of the Panel may be familiar with or have contact with individuals involved in the case under review. In such cases, members must report these affiliations to the Panel, and this information is recorded in the meeting minutes. If panel members determine they have a conflict of interest, they are excused from voting on the panel’s findings and recommendations for that case.